THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM
The experience of Malta and Cyprus

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter will look briefly at Malta and Cyprus, two strategically-located Mediterranean islands which also share a British colonial past, indicating some similarities and differences in their development. As independent states, too, in spite of some marked contrasts, these islands continue to have certain common concerns and aspirations in the broader context of a European Mediterranean.

Much as interdisciplinary approaches to historiography exemplified by Fernand Braudel have been influential in regarding the Mediterranean as a regional entity (Braudel 1949), this sea – largely due perhaps to its very geography – has been perceived in ‘holistic’ terms since time immemorial. Greeks from Homer to Herodotus characterize it simply as ‘The Sea’; in the Old Testament it is the ‘Great Sea’ (Mare Magnum); and Romans later called it ‘Our Sea’ (Mare Nostrum), as did others in more recent times. The epithet Mare Mediterraneum literally means ‘the sea in the middle of the earth’. Samuel Johnson even said that ‘almost all that which sets us above savages has come to us from the shores of this sea’ (Vella 1985). Toynbee, however, categorized Europeans as

those inhabitants of the north-western peninsula of the Old World, and of the adjacent islands, who are ecclesiastical subjects or ex-subjects of the Patriarchate of Rome: in other words we mean those Catholic and Protestant...
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Christians who live in the north-western corner of the Old World.

(Beloff 1957)

As a human unit the Mediterranean provided a rather closed area for exchange and intercourse, but it has also been 'the great divider, the obstacle that had to be overcome'. It is cities and communications, writes Braudel, that have imposed 'a unified construction on a geographical space' (Braudel 1973).

The history no less than the geography are in the sinews of this complex area, whether we look to the metropolitan hinterland cities of Europe or to the Mediterranean basin's shores, or, indeed, if we consider both at the same time - thus debunking' conventional notions of defined continents and creating a new inter- or extra-continental focus (Frendo 1981).

The Mediterranean is a 'Middle Sea' in a double role: not only does it lie between Europe and Africa, it also has joined the Atlantic to the Near and the Far East when through the Straits of Gibraltar and, after 1869, through the Suez Canal, it became the main trading route for the imperial powers who, until fifty years ago, largely controlled its destinies: the British, the French and, to a lesser extent, the Italians.

Throughout this period Mediterranean islands were sought after and changed hands: Minorca and the Ionian Islands, Crete and Rhodes, Corsica and Sardinia. At the crossroads of traffic in all directions were three main centre points: Gibraltar, Malta and Cyprus - all three coloured red on the map in worn school textbooks. After holding on to Gibraltar in repeated sieges, having captured it from Spain in 1704, the British extended their hold eastwards, taking Malta from France in 1800, then Cyprus from Turkey in 1878. The first remains so far a British possession; the second only became independent in 1964 but survives as a unitary democratic state; the third retains British military bases and its 1960 independence arrangement has been rendered unworkable.

Insularity and relative isolation counterbalanced by strategic geographical location, as demonstrated by long stints of foreign control, endowed such Mediterranean contexts and communities with remarkable identities and peculiarities, despite their own serious reservations about the respective metropoles - Madrid or Paris, Rome or London, Athens or Ankara. In the
Gibraltar-Malta-Cyprus axis, through the wand of imperialism Britain could be said to have superimposed common unities: teaching the (European) natives English, promoting commercial and military activity thereby reorienting demand for labour and skill, and introducing (at least pro forma) tenets of liberal constitutional government and procedural legal maxims. At a deeper level, British colonialism preyed on existing or potential differences or conflicts of interest or of perception, frequently inducing an Englishness that was unreal, a rather transient hybrid in place of what might have been a less contorted evolution.

In both areas under review, the overseas Anglo-Saxon and the generally Latin standard came into contact, were contrasted, sometimes adapting in collaboration, more often clashing through resistance and opposition. Rulers tried to create or draw upon a ‘non-European’ or ‘less-Latin’ residue as a malleable counterweight to the usually dominant anti-English ‘traditionalist’ formation. At the same time, and partly for such reasons, opponents stretched their hands northwards towards real or imaginary motherlands for cultural – and indeed, at times, political – sustenance and support. Scars ran deep: the result was a (still unresolved) self-identity crisis in the ‘British’ Mediterranean.

Malta and Cyprus in varying degrees have long sought to prove their Europeanity. As independent states they have been increasingly on the same wavelength as the state visit to Malta of Cypriot President George Vassiliou in June 1991, and an earlier visit by Archbishop Makarios, have further confirmed. A cultural agreement signed in February 1991 is similarly indicative of growing contacts between these two island states and ex-colonies.

**MALTA**

Malta was under British rule for 164 years. During this period, especially from the 1870s onwards, the British had sought to anglicize and, so far as was feasible, to assimilate the Maltese. This was mainly out of fear that the cultural, religious, literary, historical and geographical affinities and proximities with the Italian peninsula, threatened imperial interest potentially or actually. ‘Italianita’ thus became a cheval de bataille of the
emergent colonial nationalism in resistance to assimilation and acculturation: 'denationalization' was a favourite term used. Arguing that the British Empire would end but the geography would not change, 'pro-Italians' sought to restate and reinvigorate precisely those links and sensitivities which their rulers wished to dampen and to fade out, thereby reinforcing them for a long while in that process. While the socially-powerful Roman Catholic church hierarchy were treated with silken gloves, bishops successively knighted and Protestant proselytization kept to a minimum, what the British also did was to instigate and to patronize the growing 'pro-English' party, holding out preferment, or simply opportunity, in jobs at the dockyard, with the forces and in the civil service (provided those employed could speak some English and preferably were known to be 'loyal'). Emigration prospects to the English-speaking world, especially Australia after the Second World War, were also greatly encouraged. In effect this helped to alienate the working classes, who tended to be bread-and-butter loyalist, from the middle classes who, being better educated and more independent of means, tended to oppose colonialism and to seek responsible government for the island (Frendo 1979; 1989).

In the ensuing occupational and educational, parochial and national, governmental and partisan confusion, the nationalist party essentially upheld Italian against its substitution by English, and looked to Italy for cultural survivance rather than to Britain, whereas the imperialist and later the labour parties tended to look to Britain and continuing dependence on the Crown for utilitarian, socio-cultural and emigration links. The local camp was thus divided into a generally internecine rivalry.

Not so small as Gibraltar, nor ethnically and religiously divided like Cyprus, Malta had a fertile enough ground for the evolution of a common nationality and the development of democratic structures (Frendo 1975). That as late as the 1950s its Labour Party, led by Dominic Mintoff, should see as a long-term solution Malta's integration with the United Kingdom possibly betray a rootless want of national belonging, or, more simply, the poor countryman's bid for a quick penny, or both together (Austin 1971). An anglophile in the early part of his career, Mintoff, like Lord Strickland before him, was
in this sense the obverse of what the elder and the younger Mizzi had been in the nationalist movement: *in extremis* one had a progression from apparently being 'more Italian than the Italians' to 'more English than the English'. Not unlike Enrico (Nerik) Mizzi who, in 1912, had proposed federation with Italy, Mintoff saw the need for dependence and association under certain conditions, but he expressed this differently – desiring to deepen rather than to dampen the British connection. In spite of all the latter-day anti-British rhetoric, when Mintoff returned to power in 1971 he had the Anglo-Maltese defence agreement renegotiated and extended to 1979. In anticipation of the departure of his onetime mentors, however, he came to rely increasingly on other outside support – especially Gaddafi's Libya.

While looking beyond to the geographically-more-removed Anglo-Saxon standard, however, the Labour Party had supported the elevation of Maltese, a Semitic vernacular, to the position of a national language and as a tool for the learning of English. Learning English through the medium of Maltese was a wedge that eventually drove Italian from the curriculum and, after 1940, from public affairs (until the advent of Italian television in the late 1950s). Maltese and English remain the official languages today. Yet, once the 'integration with Britain' failed, Mintoff's party in 1958 proposed a 'Break with Britain' resolution, which Borg Olivier's Nationalists, who had opposed integration, readily supported. Later on, in the 1970s and 1980s, from government, the Labour Parties upheld 'neutrality' and 'non-alignment' and shied away from conventional western associations. The Nationalists, on the other hand stuck to a pro-European policy and in 1976 first committed the party to seeking full membership of the EEC. In July 1990, once back in government, they applied for membership, as Cyprus also did.

The Labour or Socialist Party was in office from 1971 to 1987 for the longest administration in Malta's electoral history. These were difficult and trying times which have been commented on extensively in the world media. But in May 1987 power was transferred to the Nationalist (Christian Democratic) Party led by Edward Fenech Adami, who won an absolute majority of the popular vote for the second time in succession.
The Cypriot experience as an island-state and as a 'nation' has been bitter and has not so far seen any lasting redress, even as efforts to bring about a solution intensify with prodding from President Bush in both Athens and Ankara.

In January 1985, at the UN Headquarters in New York, the then Cyprus President, and former Makarios confidante, Kyprianou, met the Turkish Cypriot leader Denktash for the first time since 1979. This 'summit' was intended to produce a framework for a comprehensive settlement of the post-1974 Cyprus question: as a timetable for implementing the phases leading to a federated republic of Cyprus. The parties, however, could hardly agree about an agenda and the terms of reference to be adopted.

Ironically, long-time rivals Clerides and Denktash were both British-trained lawyers - one from Lincoln’s Inn, the other from Gray’s Inn. But differences in Cyprus run deeper than in either Malta or Gibraltar. As in Lebanon, internal cultural conflicts were exacerbated by ethnic as well as by religious differences.

The one unifying colonial factor in a positive sense, in this situation, may be said to have been the common usage of English between the two communities, but the British never set up a university in Cyprus during their eighty-two years there. It is only now, in the early 1990s, that one is being launched – with Greek and Turkish as its main languages.

In the wake of an attempted coup d'etat, inspired by mainland Greek officers against President Makarios in 1974, which sought crudely to impose the long-held Greek Cypriot aspiration of enosis or union with Greece, Turkey invaded the northern part of Cyprus, invoking the 1960 tripartite Treaty of Guarantee, and refusing to budge ever since. These two events finally split the island in half, with Turkey dominant in the north, and the Greek Cypriots concentrated more than ever in the central and southern section. Feelings have run so high that it is not clear whether outright partition can be averted, or whether a semblance of unity in this island state may be saved through federation. The Turkish side is isolated, with the Turkish-Cypriot state not recognized by any other state save Turkey herself, and the Turks have been desperately trying to justify their position (Denktash
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1982), or at least to explain it historically and juridically (Necatigil 1989).

United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 649 of 12 March 1990 again called for 'a bi-communal Federal Republic of Cyprus' safeguarding its independence and territorial integrity and excluding 'in whole or in part with any other country and any form of partition or secession'. The leaders of the two communities were urged to seek 'a federation that will be bi-communal as regards the constitutional aspects and bi-zonal as regards the territorial aspects' (Ertekun 1990).

Britain first assumed control of Cyprus by the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, then annexed it in 1914, and then made it a 'Crown Colony' in 1925. But from the start the predominant feeling in the island was 'pro-Greek'; indeed, three-quarters of the population were of Greek descent and spoke Greek. Ironically, however, the island was geographically tucked away under Turkey's belly, and politically had most recently belonged to it, not Greece. Nevertheless, the religious, ethnic and linguistic ties with Greece were dominant, as was fear or resentment of the former Ottoman power.

The Greek-Cypriot bishop of Citium told Sir Garnet Wolseley in 1878 that the Cypriot people welcomed the occupation because they expected Britain would let them become part of 'Mother Greece', as had happened with the Ionian Islands some years earlier (and indeed, this might well have happened in 1915 during the First World War when Britain sought to appease Greece and defend Serbia against Bulgaria). Nevertheless, Greeks and Turks in Cyprus for the most part co-existed: it was not uncommon for minorities from either side to live peacefully in mixed villages all over the island (Salih 1978).

In reaction to the anti-British movement for union with Greece, or for independence from Britain, the British tended naturally to cultivate the greater fidelity of the Turkish-Cypriots who, being in the minority, stood more to gain from British patronage. Seeds of additional division were thus sown under the noble pretext of ensuring minority rights, which truly may have sometimes required protection against the EOKA organization of General Grivas (Reddaway 1986; Hitchens 1984). There was less protection by mutual consensus; colonial despatches written in London for application in the field
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did not always help the intended beneficiaries in the long run.

While not perhaps as disquieting as Lebanon, and not as continuously bloody, the Cypriot question is none the less a tragic one because with goodwill, without undue interference, and within a homegrown constitutional framework, it is known that different ethnic groups with less of a shared past than Cypriots have co-existed and developed a common adherence and allegiance to statehood, even to nationhood. While not denying the persistence of a strong separate consciousness – of being part of the ‘Greek’ and ‘Turkish’ nation respectively – students of Cypriot history have sometimes found astonishing ‘not the existence but the weakness of mutual distrust’ (Kadritzke and Wagner 1979).

Yet in a way Cyprus never really became fully independent. Independence was itself subject to the tripartite agreement reached in 1959 between Britain, Greece and Turkey, with two sovereign military bases still retained by Britain. Greece and Turkey, although both members of NATO, continued keenly eyeing every turn of events in their respective spheres of influence and, in the end, claiming the right to intervene under the very agreement which was supposed to guarantee the country’s independence. Cypriots were repeatedly excluded from negotiations by the ‘powers’ on Cyprus (Erlich 1974). Even if a separate national consciousness incorporating the Greek and Turkish strains had been permitted to develop, which it was not, Cyprus would still have been subjected to political interests emanating from its strong and rival neighbours. Both felt they had a stake in it, if only through the provenance of their people(s) inhabiting the place.

CONCLUSION

Thus, on the one hand we have the unities of small Mediterranean states – common trade routes and cultural import-export, ethnic admixtures over the centuries, the ancient heritage, civilizations and treasures, the subjugation to ‘foreign’ rule and, increasingly, the general resistance to that with a view to independence, prosperity and peace. On the other hand – is this insidiously an ultimate ‘unity’? – you have the very considerable problems facing these southern Europeans, at one
time prototypical and peripheral, in securing their independence politically, economically and, not least of all, culturally. Diversities seem to reinforce the unities: would incorporation and integration in the dreamed-of larger whole – be it tomorrow’s Europe or yesterday’s Empire – secure and refine these nationalities or swamp and gradually eradicate them?

As European union should have neither the imperialistic motive nor the nationalistic itch, it could well serve to redirect latent feelings of dispossession, insecurity, and unfulfilment experienced in areas such as Cyprus and Malta, by affording a broader and more accommodating body politic willing to shape a new economic order and yet inspired by a common heritage. A European Mediterranean provincialism might be better able to guard and to cherish the individual charms composing it.

In the history of the British empire Malta and Cyprus were the only two island colonies with strong historical and cultural claims to Europeanity. They were in effect the only two European British colonies over a long period, although in the case of Cyprus there was always the Turkish angle. Although somewhat distanced by British occupation from the continental European mainstream, and geographically ‘emarginated’ on the southern fringes of the continent, especially Cyprus, generally both felt they were spiritually and culturally part of mainland European ‘mothers’; that British colonialism defied or denied what to some of their politicians, mostly in Cyprus, appeared like manifest destiny. Once they had obtained independence in the early 1960s and tried to put their house in order, both countries have sought to vindicate those past self-fulfilling claims by joining the European Community as full members.

REFERENCES


